



PRISONER AUTOGYNOGRAPHIES: A COUNTER CANON OF PRISON NARRATIVES

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Abstract

Autogynography [Women Autobiography] is a potent literary genre that registers the subaltern voices in every known sphere of social sciences. Prison self-life narratives have emerged as a vital document of the prisoners. It has become their only medium of communication to the outside world. Women prisoners' personal narrative is a small aperture that would permit us to recognise, revise and react to the lives of women prisoners. An inclusive study of the prison autogynographies would aid us to study the recurrent themes, narrative patterns and core issues confronted by the women prisoners. The outcome of such a literary study can influence substantial actions and reactions that would resolve the troubles of prisoners and prison life. This paper attempts to study the colossal potentialities of the genre of autobiography in influencing other social sciences like criminology and in particular penology.

Key words: Autogynography, Autobiography, prison narratives, penology.

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Introduction

Autobiography now-a-days popularly known as self-life writing is a subaltern genre within the literary canon that is dominated by fiction for over a couple of centuries. Albeit the genre of fiction underwent rampant changes over the centuries, alternative narrative modes like autobiography and biography haven't yet garnered a central position within the canon. Despite the fact that the genre of autobiography dates back to the lives of Augustus, it never rose to imminence in any particular period of the history of English literature as the genre is susceptible to the power politics of the primordial binary of truth and false. Even with the poststructuralist nullification of the binaries, the genre is still approached with suspicion. In spite of the immense potentialities of the genre of autobiography even beyond the realm of literature

and its influence in every realm of social sciences, it still remains a marginalized genre.

The subaltern genre of autobiography gives recourse to a plenty of subaltern voices from different realms to register their unheard voices not for just readership but to cause an impact beyond the covers of the book. Prisoner autobiographies/Autobiographies by prisoners' is a politically powerful narrative that gives voice to the prisoners to express their prison experiences and to project their views of the justice and the justice system that at times made them face the injustices on a daily basis within the fortified walls of the prison. Prisoners are restricted by law to voice their views. Their autobiographies counter the official discourses or the legal documents. Prisoner autobiographies give an insider account of the prison and contribute substantially to the realm of criminology that can be used for empirical

qualitative research. Prisoner autobiographies assist in mapping the history of prison law, the hidden history, architecture of past times, daily routines, assimilatory process, different kinds of prisoners and criminal activities, gender based differences between male and female prisoners, psychological changes of both the prisoners and the families, social stigma faced by them, guilt, atonement and reformation of the prisoners are a few of the issues that can be excavated from prisoner autobiographies.

Discussion

Women prisoners are the most marginalized both as prisoners and as women facing more resilient stigma from the society. Multiple levels of subalternity and multiple silencing factors is an unimaginable burden upon the women prisoners who has lost even the very last voice are left with no other option but to self-life writing as the only recourse that help them to stay connected to the outside world. Prisons are the hidden world that dehumanises inmates that brandish them as criminals by the judicial system, society and media. Unfortunately all the three factors are hostile to women caught in the crime. They receive more scorn and brandishing than the male criminals.

Prisoner autogynographies/ women prisoner autobiographies highlight the gendered experiences within prisons which at times eventually catalysed the change in the prison laws and made improvements in prison management. Prisoner autogynographies accentuates the more severe, diverse and extreme issues faced by the women than the male prisoners and the issues that make them vulnerable. The recurrent themes of prison autogynographies are the separation of women from her husband and children and the sudden alienation forcefully thrust upon them.

One of the early examples of prisoner Autogynography is Phoebe Willets' *Invisible Bars* in 1965. Phoebe underwent jail sentence for six month for illegal demonstration. The sub-humanizing prison life had a severe impact upon her personality, identity and psyche. Audrey Peckham wrote her autogynography *A Woman in Custody* in 1985. She was a school teacher who underwent eight months

jail term for the murder⁴ of her lover's wife. Her autogynography is also about the plight of the women prisoners as mothers. the psychological trauma that the mothers had to undergo due to the separation of the children and the impact of the jail term on the lives of the children, broken families, father deserting their children etc. She writes that it is an additional punishment that women prisoners undergo than that of men prisoners. Her autogynography also lists that most women prisoners were undergoing jail term for minor issues like prostitution, drug use, drug peddling, pick pocketing and shop lifting. Her autobiography also reflects that most women prisoners had a strong hatred for men who had abused her and which eventually led them to the crime.

Piper Kerman's *Orange is The New Black*, Marina Nemat's *Prisoner of Tehran*, Nawal El-Saadawai's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography*, Ana Rodriguez's *Dairy of a Survivor: Nineteen Years in a Cuban Women's Prison*, Malika Oufkir's *Stolen Lives; Twenty Years in a Desert Jail*, Donna Hylton's *A Little Piece of Light: A Memoir of Hope, Prison and a Life Unbound* and Mira Behn's *The Spirit Pilgrimage* are some of the prisoner autogynographies.

Conclusion

Women prisoners and elderly prisoners' autogynographies in particular is not well represented in the literary canon either due to the non-availability of such specialized autogynographies or due to the marginalization impacted by the politicization of the literary canon. The repercussion of such marginalization within the literary canon would severely impact the social science of criminology and in particular penology that heavily rely on the outcome of non-legal narratives like autobiographies than the counter official discourses. Prisoner autogynographies are a vital document which inspite of its inconsistencies reflect the experiences of imprisonment, the impotency of law within the premises of prisons, loss of family, marriage and children, escalating health issues faced by the women, the unattended mental trauma and the stigmatization suffered is consistently echoed in the prisoner autogynography.

The marginalized autogynographies cry for attention which when recognized would definitely impact the prison law and the society's perception of prison and prisoners.

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BIONOTE

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